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Santa Monica Sues Mobil Oil

By FRANK CLIFFORD, TIMES STAFF WRITERS and DUKE HELFAND, TIMES STAFF WRITERS | January 29, 1997

Faced with increasing evidence of drinking water pollution in California from a common fuel additive, state and federal regulators are struggling to curb the ill effects of a chemical they consider an overall plus for the environment.

On Tuesday, the city of Santa Monica filed suit against Mobil Oil Corp., blaming leaks at a Mobil-owned gas station for contaminating water in city wells with the heavily used additive, known as MTBE. The city has shut down half of its usual water supply after detecting high levels of the chemical in wells.

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MTBE is a key component of reformulated fuel, designed to cut smog and reduce benzene, one of gasoline's most toxic components.

Believed to be much less potent than benzene, MTBE is still regarded as a potential health hazard, especially in drinking water, where it may cause cancer. The acrid chemical is thought to be getting into reservoirs from boat exhaust and possibly from wind-borne auto emissions, and is leaching into wells from leaking underground tanks.

In all, Santa Monica officials say, eight or nine oil companies may have contributed to the contamination of the city's well fields.

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The situation in Santa Monica and the widespread discovery of lesser amounts of MTBE elsewhere, including two Los Angeles Department of Water and Power wells in the San Fernando Valley, have raised new questions about the dangers of the chemical, the difficulty of cleaning it up and the vigilance of government regulators.

"It is a scandal that we have gotten to this point, with millions of pounds of this stuff being manufactured and so little known about its hazards," said John Froines, chairman of UCLA's department of environmental health sciences.

Froines, who said he is an unpaid consultant to Santa Monica, faulted the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for failing to assess the results of Italian research on laboratory animals, published in 1995, which made the strongest link so far between MTBE in drinking water and cancer.

The agency released an analysis of MTBE in 1993, concluding that the chemical was safe to use. But that research focused on the effects of inhaling gasoline fumes.

EPA officials in California and Washington declined this week to be interviewed about MTBE unless their names were withheld from print--an unusual condition for the agency.







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On that basis, several EPA officials acknowledged that the agency has an incomplete knowledge of MTBE's health effects but said there are plans to review the Italian research by Cesari Maltoni, head of the Bologna Institute of Oncology.

In the meantime, according to California officials, the EPA has issued a "health advisory" recommending a maximum limit of 70 parts per billion for MTBE in drinking water.

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Amounts in excess of the federal advisory limit have turned up near a marina in Shasta Lake in Northern California and in some of the Santa Monica wells. Because it smells and tastes like turpentine, MTBE tends to be easily detectable even at lower levels.

EPA officials defend the continued use of MTBE. They are joined by representatives of the California Environmental Protection Agency, who say the worst consequence of the MBTE scare would be to abandon use of such additives.

"The health benefits of MTBE in gasoline are really enormous," one official said. "We've seen it with ozone and carbon monoxide as well as toxic pollutants like benzine. The risk you face from benzene far outweigh risks from MTBE."

Other agency officials said the EPA did not move faster to pin down the possible dangers of MTBE, in part, because it was felt that a federally subsidized program to remove or repair leaking underground tanks would take care of any problems.

The EPA now faces an uncomfortable dilemma, sources say. The agency promoted the use of additives like MTBE by oil companies but must decide whether to require the same companies to pay millions of dollars to get the chemical out of contaminated water sources.

In preparing their lawsuit, Santa Monica officials said they had intended to ask Mobil to pay for the cleanup of at least two polluted wells. But they dropped that demand at EPA's request, city officials said, asking only that Mobil pay for replacement water and for unspecified damages.

According to the lawsuit, Mobil knew that underground storage tanks at the Wilshire Boulevard gas station were leaking as early as 1987 but failed to address the problem or notify city leaders.

City officials closed two water wells at the Arcadia Well Field in October after detecting MTBE that had allegedly spread from the gas station about 250 feet away. Now officials fear that MTBE may have contaminated the underground aguifers that feed other wells.

May 1, 2003

"Mobil put its profits ahead of the public's right to safe and clean drinking water," Mayor Pam O'Connor told a news conference Tuesday.

Mobile's western region manager, Lucille Cavanaugh, said the company discovered gasoline in the topsoil and ground water at the station in 1987 but removed the hazardous chemicals before it reached the city water wells on Bundy Drive.

She said the company first detected MTBE in September. She added that efforts to test the two city water wells for MTBE proved futile because the city had refused permission until last month.

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